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Bloodied but unbowed

DEPARTING officials of the Ford administration have displayed rare candor recently in comments on their brushes with the Washington bureaucracy.

And while they deplore the ponderous pace of governmental processes, they are in general agreement that democracy works.

Even so, their experience suggests that there will be little immediate impact by the new capital team after the inauguration tomorrow of President-elect Jimmy Carter.

Outgoing Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, in fact, contends that civilians in the Pentagon require 18 months "before getting up to speed on the job." But he concedes that "this place works. It will run with you or without you."

F. David Mathews, who has run the cumbersome Department of Health, Education and Welfare for the past 17 months, learned that "money is not automatically effective" in attacking HEW problems. He noted that it took 18 federal programs to build a hospital in one Florida community, when ideally one should be sufficient.

"You just can't get an elephant to do ballet," Mathews said. "You can only get it to do what elephants do."

Donald Alexander, Internal Revenue Service commissioner, believes that people deserve better government than that that requires four hours a day "running to the fire extinguisher, using it and refilling it." He is pleased, however, that some days it is possible to move "four steps forward and only three and one-half backward."

George Bush, departing director of the CIA, confessed a "sense of unfulfillment." His regret is that he was unable to convey to the public what "a tremendous asset" the CIA is to the country.

Carla Hills, retiring secretary of Housing and Urban Development, insists that she is turning over "a shiny piece of machinery," although it moves slowly.

"But that's the democratic system," she said.

The parting thoughts of the veterans may not make up a textbook for the Carter people, but they do confirm that government is manageable — if the managers can avoid entrapment in the bureaucratic swamp.